Family and Hope in Finland

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abstract: The article reports on a survey regarding the importance of family life in contemporary Finland. The "sacred" character of domestic sphere is interpreted as a feature that generates and sustains hope and meaning in everyday human life. While marriage and procreation rates decrease in Scandinavian societies, family and home values are nevertheless given a high priority. The article also claims that many current philosophical and theological explanations of hope outdated. New approaches to hope are needed to understand how ecological matters shape the evaluation of home and family.

keywords: home, family, ecology, linear and circular time, hope, nostalgia, holiness

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In December 2018, a large survey was published regarding what contemporary Finns consider as sacred or holy.[1] The Finnish word "pyhä", originally meaning liminal, covers both the sacred and the holy. While the word has a religious color, it has also kept the old anthropological meaning of a boundary not to be crossed or an end not to be instrumentalized.

In the survey, 6400 Finns evaluated various areas of reality in terms of holiness. The following list covers 17 main areas, giving the percentage of all responses in which this area is counted as sacred or holy.

1. Love, "the closest ones" (this Finnish word often means family but is more inclusive and thus used in surveys) 68 %
2. Peace, home, rest 56 %
3. Security 54 %
4. Human dignity 53 %
5. Health 53 %
6. Homeland, Finnish independence 46 %
7. Nature 44 %
8. Individual freedom 43 %
9. New life, children 36 %
10. Helping others, voluntary participation 30 %
11. Death and related matters, like graveyards, funerals 22 %
12. Art, music, culture 20 %
13. Science, new knowledge 19 %

[1] Anne Birgitta Pessi, Ville Pitkänen, Jussi Westinen, Henrietta Grönlund, *Pyhyyden ytimessä: Tutkimus suomalaisten arvoista ja pyhyyden kokemisesta* (Helsinki: Suomen Kulttuurirahasto, 2018). Open access pdf in: http://e2.fi/publication/68 .

14. Traditions, rituals, heritage 16 %
15. Personal spirituality 16 %
16. Religious communities and institutions 15 %
17. Myself and personal opinions 14 %

The survey received a fairly large amount of publicity in Finland before Christmas. It was discussed in the newspapers as well as in television channels. Some commentators interpreted the result as proving the secular values of contemporary European society. Others interpreted the result as saying that the category of holiness is not absent in Finnish society. Due to the Christian heritage, people have a sense of sacred. It is not, however, attributed to religion but to such ultimate realities which current Finns considers as being the most important ones in their life.

Holy Things in Finland

The most significant result of this survey is found in the very high estimate which traditional family values receive in it. Family and home are the two most important sources of holiness in Finnish experience. This is particularly remarkable since other societal indicators manifest very different results. For instance, the relevance of marriage has significantly decreased. Most young couples live together for years before marrying and very often they do not marry at all. The birth rate, which for many decades was significantly higher in Finland, Sweden and Norway than in Germany, Italy and Spain, has recently gone down dramatically. The Finnish reproduction rate was 1.40 in 2018 and is expected to decrease further in spite of exemplary child care and school opportunities.[2]

The survey documents the experience which many Finns have with their own children and the next generation. We see on the one hand that the next generation is not very interested in procreating children and establishing traditional families. On the other hand, their lifestyle and values do not deviate very much from that of previous generations. They like to have nice homes and spend more time with their partner than their own parents did. Monogamous love relationships are tremendously important. Such a relationship is not, however, considered as an instrumental step into adulthood and towards economic prosperity but as an end in itself. In sociology, this current form of loving your partner is seen in terms of a "pure relationship"[3], an ideal state which does not exist for something else but is a *telos*, an end which does not need any other additions to thrive.

As the list concerns all 6400 people interviewed proportionally to their amount in the entire population, the relatively low importance of religion and several other institutional realities is shared by both elderly and the young. At the same time, Finns do not prefer

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[2] http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/tieto_ja_tutkimus/vaestontutkimuslaitos/tilastoja/syntyvyys/syntyneiden-maara/

[3] Cf. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

individualistic or private manifestations of the holy. On the contrary, personal opinions and personal spirituality remain at the bottom of the list.[4]

Some very collective and institutional matters are high on the list. Social security and national independence are typical values of Scandinavian states. These realities have some sacred aura but they need not indicate problematic nationalism. At the same time, as nationalism nowadays permeates so many countries, this feature should not remain ignored. The sacred characted of human dignity and natural environment is also noteworthy. Human dignity is no individualistic value in the Nordic countries but typically connected with global responsibilities and rights to social welfare.

The idea of a sacred nature or environment has in some sense always been important in Scandinavia. Nowadays it is primarily related to global warming and the need to preserve biodiversity on the planet Earth. When I discuss with my own students of theology, they are very well aware of such features of the sacred as liminal, a frontier that must not be subjected to production and economic growth.

Family and home, or the private sphere of "the closest ones" is, however, considered even more sacred than human dignity and the natural environment. It is not obvious why this is the case. Perhaps society and working life are today so uncertain and demanding that ordinary people must seek happiness elsewhere. Family, love and home can provide a sense of meaning and ultimate reality even when society cannot. The private sphere is preferred over the societal and political sphere. Digital technology and social media enable the effective creation of individually tailored private spheres.[5] Nevertheless, the precise relationship between privacy, family and the sacred remains puzzling.

Understanding Hope

In the following, I attempt a slightly different interpretation. Let us connect the idea of holy with the attitude or emotion of hope. When people tell what they consider as holy they are also telling what gives them hope, either individual hope or hope for humanity in general.

As hope is conceptually related to fear, the same liminal issues also tell what the Finns are afraid of. When we consider health, security and nature as sacred, we also fear illness, violence and environmental pollution. In positive terms, hope is the heart's desire, and as such a power towards the liminal issues of final meaningfulness, issues which are often unseen or lay in the future. In this sense, hope is related to the sacred though not identical with it.[6]

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[4] Younger people evaluate personal opinions slightly higher. Older people evaluate religion slightly more positively. With regard to home, rest, and the closest ones no significant age differences were reported.

[5] Cf. Zizi A. Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

[6] In this and following I draw from my forthcoming Finnish textbook *Oppi toivosta* ("On hope"). The only recent theological survey on hope which I dare to recommend is

While there are many different views of hope in theological literature, one cannot easily find accounts that explain the issues described above. Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, focuses on societal hope and connects it with the biblical hope that is related to God's promise.[7] He is mainly interested in showing the parallels and distinctive features of Christian eschatological hope with the societal hopes of collective history. Moltmann does not offer much help when I consider the life of contemporary Finns. We do not place our hope in any utopian future but in private life with the closest ones. The categories of family and home are almost absent in Moltmann's classical work.

Wolfhart Pannenberg's theology of hope as anticipation is also indebted to the progressive spirit of the late 20th century. Pannenberg makes a rather strong distinction between definitely Christian hope and the vague hopes of secular Westerners. He emphasizes the collective powers of Christian hope, but he is not interested in family and home in this context.[8]

In recent American theology, there are relevant discussions regarding flourishing as the end of human aspiration and even as the content of hope. These discussions are often borrowed from neo-Aristotelian political philosophy or from positive psychology. As a Scandinavian Lutheran theologian, I find the concept of flourishing somewhat misleading in theology.[9] Moreover, the Finnish survey does not seem to indicate anything like flourishing. The sacred ends hoped for are rather conservative, aiming at staying at the same place and avoiding threats. While they do not advocate passivity, they appreciate rest and remain very different from the active pursuit of happiness typical in American views of flourishing.

Some philosophical concepts of hope may explain the results of the survey better than the theological ones. Many philosophers, both historical and contemporary, reject the attitude of hope. They claim that hope makes people look like those megalomanic political leaders who strive to make their nation great. Rejecting hope and positive thinking is, according to the philosophers, much better for our understanding of the neighbour. Without too much positive thinking, we can feel compassion and alleviate suffering. [10]

Such modest attitude may be helpful for understanding the results of our Finnish survey. Finns do not hope for big things and we do not expect too much from religion, arts and science. Rather, we seek domestic happiness among our loved ones. We do not need

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Ingolf Dalferth, *Hoffnung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016).

[7] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

[8] I here consider the treatment of hope in the second volume of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[9] Cf. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York: Harper, 1969). Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 145-158 offers a balanced theological account of flourishing.

[10] See e.g. Roger Scruton *The Uses of Pessimism and the Dangers of False Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Barbara Ehrenreich *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (New York: Picador, 2010).

institutional frames or economic success for this quest. Perhaps this is why Finland is ranked the happiest country in the world in the United Nations reports of 2018 and 2019.[11]

Postmodern and Ecological Hope

One contemporary philosopher who advocates hope is the radical postmodernist Richard Rorty. Rorty declares that science, philosophy and politics cannot offer us any standards of life. Everything is merely social construction which may have meaning for the one who constructs it but not generally. Therefore, there is no scientific knowledge nor even truth or justified opinions. This means for Rorty that we must replace knowledge with hope. In a truly postmodern and multicultural society we all train our imagination and desire to shape as different individual hopes as possible. Such maximal diversity of identities based on hope and imagination makes humans peaceful and caring for one another, Rorty believes. This is what Rorty calls romantic hope and sentimentalism.[12]

Rorty's social constructionism captures something of our postmodern era. While Moltmann manifests the forward-looking and historically-minded optimism of the 1960s, Rorty's romantic hope makes visible the postmodern plurality which does not believe in truth and knowledge. However, the Finnish survey is not as pluralistic as Rorty's philosophy. While Finns may have individually different hopes, their general scope remains limited to the issues of home, family and love relationships.

In addition, the postmodern program of constructing identities has developed to a potentially dangerous declaration of an entirely post-truth era. In Europe, this has led to the rise of so-called identitarian movements which connect their romantic hopes with nationalism and nostalgia.[13] The vision of replacing truthfulness with sentimentally constructed hopes does not seem to lead to an affirmation of peaceful multiculturalism but, on the contrary, to exclusivist and potentially violent sectarian identities. While Rorty (who died in 2007) cannot be blamed for such developments, his concept of hope is not solid enough to resist the emotional temptations of our post-truth era.

My quest after a viable concept of hope thus seems to lack definite results. Both the optimistic and progressive theological views of Moltmann and Pannenberg and the postmodern conceptions of current philosophy remain inadequate in the task of capturing the family-related hopes of today's Scandinavians. We need new theological programmes which

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[11] https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finland_still_the_happiest_country_in_the_world_says_un_report/10698146

[12] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999).

[13] See José Pedro Zuquete, *The Identitarians: The Movement against Globalism and Islam in Europe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018). This meaning of identity differs fundamentally from the American identity politics as presented in Cressida Heyes, "Identity Politics", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu .

can explain the turn towards *oikonomia*, family relations at large, and away from *politia* and *ecclesia*.

This turn to privacy may to some extent be nostalgic in the sense that people aim at reviving some paradisiac state in which they live like the hobbits in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. When political utopias are dead and societal problems appear as dystopic, domestic privacy can manifest a sense of nostalgia even for young people. At the same time, this nostalgia does not amount to identitarianism but rather to a sort of ecological awareness.

When I consider the typical supporters of Finnish Green Party, they are often young couples with or without small children. They advocate vegetarian diet, move around without private cars and, if brave enough, even without airplanes. They do not want economic growth but increased recycling. They do not want to build new suburbs but renovate the old ones so that people can live there with their already existing resources. Their concept of time is not linear but circular, and therefore their recycling of the past is also their hope for the future. Family, or at least the fluid circle of the closest ones, is the Archimedean point around which all other recycling revolves.

Contemporary media scholars pay increased attention to the fact that our Western planetary time of clocks and calendars is not linear but circular.[14] If we adopt circular time, the words progressive and conservative begin to lose their meanings. Our personal progress towards carbon-neutral future enables the gradual and circular return of that very future. In such context, the concepts of hope and the sacred resemble rather sabbath rest than activist flourishing.

A Kantian Account

Finally, let us briefly turn to the most obvious concept of hope, the one employed in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in particular in the so-called "Canon of Pure Reason".[15]

In the Canon, Kant asks three questions:

What can I know?

What should I do?

What may I hope?

The first question concerns the scope of knowledge. The second question concerns the law of morality. The Canon holds that a person needs to address these two questions properly before he or she can proceed to the third one. The third question is about justified hope, *was darf ich hoffen*, not about any wish or desire whatsoever. Kant teaches that one should know what can be known and do his utmost for the morality; only after these steps he has the right to hope something.

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[14] See John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[15] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

In a sense, Kant warns of false hopes. But he also affirms a justified hope. When a person knows what can be known and does what she must do, she can formulate justified hopes. A such person can strive for happiness in a just or rightful manner. Obviously, justified hope does not mean that the hope is fulfilled but the person can think of herself as worthy for hoping in this case.

For Kant, the issue of hoping enables to speak of God's existence and life after death, which for him are constituents of happiness. My particular angle here concerns the very issue that hope must be preceded with knowing the truth and doing the right. In this regard, contemporary Finns are like little Kantians, or anonymous Kantians. If we consider something as sacred, we must nevertheless know what it is and behave well enough to deserve it. Given such realism of "what can I know" and "what should I do", one's justified hopes may no longer reach to God's existence or to the afterlife. They may, however, reach to domestic happiness, social security and the preservation of human dignity.

These realms of holiness are not impossible, but they are hard enough to achieve. An educated person who follows one's own conscience may be justified in hoping for domestic happiness and human dignity. Young people in particular believe in education and personal morality when they are confronted with global warming and overpopulation.

When my students eat vegan food and do not buy a private car, they follow the first and second question of Kant's canon. After this personal knowledge and commitment, they may hope for some domestic happiness. Given the scarcity of natural resources, overpopulation and climate change, it is too much to hope for universal progress and individual prosperity, not to speak of procreating many children or deserving eternal life in the end. But a decent home and a nice partner are something that can be reached in the circular process of recycling and within the scope of sustainable energy resources.

In this manner we have an answer to the puzzle provided by the Finnish survey of 2018. Family values are high on the list of holy things because they are something that can be hoped with justification. Very subjective matters, like personal opinions or personal religion, cannot be justified in this manner. But also very objective matters, like knowledge, heritage and arts, not so speak about divine providence, are beyond hoping, as an individual person cannot justify such lofty hopes. In addition, the mid-sized hopes regarding my closest ones do not employ universal linear history but they can be justified within my everyday circular lifestyle.

The circular logic of carbon-neutral recycling remains poorly reflected in recent theological literature. Our scholarship on climate change remains socio-ethical and operates with a linear concept of time. In such ecotheology, hope remains a motivation to do more, a sort of resolute activism and almost Puritan will-power.[16]

The Finnish survey does not conceptualize the sacred in terms of will-power and linear achievement. Instead, the phenomenon of rest appears as one of the most holy things. Within

[16] I am aware of the stereotypical nature of this description. My own ecotheological preferences are found in Panu Pihkala, *Early Ecotheology and Joseph Sittler* (Zürich: LIT, 2017).

circular time, rest is more important than achievement and progress. There may be some connection between the domestic ideals and the sacred reality of rest which your home and your loved ones provide. It may even be that this reality is circular, a domestic state to which you always return after regular intervals.

Conclusion: Theology of Domestic Hope

What kind of theology of hope can we write after such considerations? Perhaps we should start with thinking whether it is really Christian to give priority to the values of home and family. Obviously, they are worth of some priority, but are they to be set as the primary objects of hope, something that is more important than the church and society at large? And if we give family and home a very high priority, does this priority also entail some institutional frames, like marriage and procreation? Or does any small group of my closest ones qualify as home and family?

The Scandinavian answer is that any small group qualifies as home and family. For the Finns of the survey, our closest ones are more important than religion and heritage, and even somewhat more important than security, health and nature. Obviously, many hermeneutical issues remain. Health and natural environment may have absolute priority if we consider the good of the entire humankind.

Theologically, home and family may not be the primary objects of Christian hope. They are rather mid-sized objects which accompany our everyday life. Perhaps theologians should pay more attention to such mid-sized objects of hope and holiness. As mid-sized objects, home and family can lead people to other and, theologically speaking, more fundamental objects. Their connections with the realities of rest and circular time need to be explored in more detail.